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THE MESSAGE IS THE MEDIUM: ELECTRONICALLY HELPING WRITING TUTORS HELP ELECTRONICALLY

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Skepticism

The history of online writing centers is a history of doubt. I experienced those reservations in 2009, when, in addition to traditional face-to-face peer tutoring, I launched my own online peer tutoring program and began training undergraduates to respond to student submissions. Online writing centers were already common, but the decision the begin tutoring online was not all mine—the university administration was encouraging faculty to create online and web-assisted courses, and it expected its academic support keep up with the pace of technology, distance learning, and even fears that a future pandemic could hinder face to face learning. After consulting with tutors and instructional technology staff, I decided on asynchronous peer tutoring: students would fill out an intake form and questionnaire about their assignment and writing process, and then they would upload what they had written; tutors would then respond via email within 24 hours, even on weekends. This system allowed us to help as many students as quickly as possible, particularly non-traditional, commuting, and working students unable to meet face to face.

Still, I was skeptical. How would tutors, even those experienced with face-to-face sessions, adapt to the new medium? The writing center literature about online tutorials I consulted was mostly critical, ambivalent, or, at best, philosophical. In 1998, Neal Lerner had already concluded that "writing center professionals can be a skeptical lot, experienced in carefully reading texts and uncovering hidden agendas; when it comes to our future with technology, that skepticism is perhaps our greatest asset" (136). In 2000, James Inman and Donna Sewell began *Taking Flight with OWLS: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work* began by couching skepticism in the language of overwork, lamenting that "the move to computer technology has occurred so rapidly that center staff and administration…have not had much opportunity to study how and when to infuse computer technology" (xix). More recently, in *Virtual Peer Review*—less about writing centers but pertaining to online peer tutoring practices—Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch warned that "the transition among classroom instructors [and, I will add, writing tutors] is not as easy as it may seem. Deep-seated notions of peer review as an exercise of oral communication—rather than written communication—complicate the transition, for virtual peer review reverses the primacy of oral over written communication so that written communication is king. Consequently, dialogue strategies that are typically employed for peer review change when placed online, and they are not as effective" (2).[1] And literature about teaching writing online, as opposed to tutoring online, is not easily applicable. *Teaching Writing Online*, for example, suggests that "creating the written global comment isn't much of a worry in the [online writing] course. You can do what you normally have done, except now you can do it in an e-environment using electronic tools" (129). Unlike online instructor grading, online peer writing tutorials do not allow tutors to do what they "normally have done."

As more students and, by necessity, tutors move online, however, directors must move beyond doubt. We must foster appropriate and effective electronic tutoring, even as we acknowledge that the strategies, and potential dangers, are not what face to face tutors are customarily trained to handle. And while different ways to create online writing centers have received critical attention, less has been written about training online tutors. How, then, can tutors emphasize process when many of the sessions may be, in Joanna Castner's words, "a two way stab in the dark" (119)? That is, they are limited to the submission and the reply; as Castner puts it, "Why do few dialogues?" (120). How can students see tutors as allies? Finally, how can tutors respond to student writing in ways that preclude editing or directive revision of any kind? This last question is for me the most important, since editing takes the power, and responsibility, of revision away from the student and most directly violates the idea of the writing center.

Online tutorials are also more permanent. As I explain to tutors, once they send their responses, it is potentially available for anyone to interpret, unlike the unrecorded, plausible deniability of the face to face session. Tutors, then, must be especially vigilant online, never writing anything to a student that they would not want that student's instructor, mother, or university administrator to see. (Thankfully, I have

never received a complaint about an online session from a professor, parent, or president.)

Instead, tutor training can emphasize the relationship between our goals and the technology. Writing center directors may be skeptical about whether tutors are prepared to conduct online tutorials and whether traditional tutor training is applicable to online tutorials, and tutors may worry that face to face professionalism and cordiality no longer apply. In this essay, I hope to provide an alternate tutoring model that updates the mission of the writing center, thus challenging both the skepticism surrounding online tutorials as well as our assumptions about what a writing center is and how it may operate in the future.

The Idea of an Online Writing Center

In 1984, Stephen North published "The Idea of a Writing Center." And while it predates online tutoring, in some ways the purpose of his essay is more relevant than ever. North meant to counteract entrenched notions that tutoring should be a remedial lab focused on papers and not people. How, then, can we sustain the idea of the writing center, in Stephen North's famous phrase, "Better writers, not necessarily—or immediately—better texts" (73), when we do not see writers, only texts? This particular doubt was already well articulated by J. A. Jackson in 2000: "At its foundation, the tutorial is writer-centered, and the tutor's job is to facilitate the writer's discovery of his or her writing self. But online, where is the tutor? Perhaps more importantly, where is the writer? The most frightening prospect of the online tutorial is that all one is left with is the writing and not the writer, the product and not the process" (2). Putting the writer above the writing was refreshing in 1984 and still relevant in 2000, and I still operate under the notion that tutors need to reach their students.

However, for all the potential drawbacks, the possibilities of seeing only screens and never faces, online tutoring allows tutors to achieve goals that can be difficult face to face, analogous to the ways in which speech and writing themselves are vastly different. For some tutors, and students, online sessions may even be preferable. As David Coogan realized in 1998, "as sensibilities [and, I will add, students' general comfort with technology] change, tutors might find other ways to express themselves with students online. We have a chance…to do something different with students in the writing center" (29). The inexperienced tutor, since she is almost always looking at a paper for the first time and starting at the beginning, may treat a face to face session as a list of disconnected difficulties, articulated as they arise. Yet the session may never discover a larger purpose, a way in which the multiple concerns coalesce into a lesson or specific, cohesive revision strategy. Other tutors may treat the session as a scavenger hunt: where is the thesis? Where is the support? Where are the problems? (Or worse, *these are* the problems.) Electronically and asynchronously, the tutor may read and determine potential concerns linearly, but her final response, unlike the face to face session, allows for the possibility of reflection and revision, taking advantage of the written word and medium.

Templates and Tutor Training

The best online responses, then, can be like the best student essays, allowing the peer tutor to take advantage of the skills that probably earned her the job in the first place.

- A written response allows the tutor to solidify her purpose and provide a single main point—just as a student essay should.
- The tutor can focus the entire response, as opposed to, say, the last ten minutes of a face to face session, providing questions and strategies for the writer to consider upon revising the paper or beginning the next one.
- The tutor can correct or direct if it helps her to formulate her response, but then she can and should revise those corrections into questions and supportive commentary. Unlike face to face sessions, asynchronous writing allows for behind-the-scenes retrospection and improvement.
- Online responses allow tutors to amplify the writer's best points and demonstrate genuine engagement with the topic, responding as a good reader, not just as a critic and certainly not as an editor.
- Yet students often do write that they want help with errors. Online responses, then, perhaps more than face to face sessions, allow tutors to indicate where stylistic problems occur, even as they resist the urge to correct. When they do comment on grammatical errors, tutors may more easily connect those errors to larger issues of purpose, clarity, and content, citing specific passages from the student's text. The response, then, becomes a form of literary criticism and close reading, with frequent use of quotation for support and evidence.

Since even the best writers have trouble beginning or focusing, I start their training with a template.[2] From there, they develop their own approach.

Dear [student's name],

Paragraph 1: Support and amplify the writer's ideas; state what works about the essay, even if it's just a single sentence, idea, or example. Wherever possible, cut and paste/quote the paper's actual language for example.

Paragraph 2: Then, raise a problem for the writer to address for the revision; possible language: *However, the* [weakest Higher Order Concern: thesis, particular supporting paragraph, development, etc.] *could be* [stronger, clearer, more specific, more personal, etc.]—[then, rephrase your concern and as a question]?

Paragraph 3 (as needed): Quote a sentence from the writer's own paper that you feel gives the writer some direction, then use it to make a suggestion: *The essay could also account for* [a reasonable

suggestion/counterargument/additional avenue of research/concern]—[then, rephrase as question]?

Paragraph 4: Boilerplate conclusion:

I would encourage you to bring the paper in for a face-to-face session, where we can usually accomplish much more. Please feel free to make an appointment through the Peer Tutor office in the Academic Success Center. If the deadline for this paper is too soon for an appointment, try to schedule a session with a writing tutor for your next paper. We look forward to seeing you in person.

[Signature and contact information]

This format has several advantages: it allows for the possibility of a genuine reader-response from the tutor and limits the possibility of inadvertent disparagement, since tutors sometimes struggle to convey tone electronically. It precludes the possibility that the inexperienced tutor may lapse into editing. And it provides the tutor with a specific, comfortable structure, as opposed to the frightening blankness of the fresh page. Obviously the template alone provides only organization; it cannot, of course, determine the substance, the questions, and the possibilities. For that, we need the tutors themselves.

Online Dialogue: Rebecca's Year of Electronic Tutoring

How can peer tutors learn to respond electrically? With practice. But like all good practice, improved tutoring demands consideration and reflection; repetition alone cannot lead to progress. And so as director, I tutor the tutors. Since the student papers were electronic, my replies to tutors' responses are electronic as well.

I would like to use examples from the year-long development of one particular tutor. A strong writer with a kind demeanor, "Rebecca" nevertheless, as she later wrote, "didn't feel particularly effective at in-person writing sessions, so I certainly didn't want to have my incompetence recorded in electronic format for all eternity." She explained further, echoing the doubts of earlier critics: "how would I get students to think about the big picture issues through an email response? Talking about issues like organization, transitions, and concept development were hard enough and lengthy enough discussions in person, plus I could make sure I was smiling and looking friendly so that the student didn't think I was being hard on them." Yet she, and the other tutors, learned by doing.

Rebecca's first online response.

Here is how Rebecca handled an online student paper analyzing a speech by President Truman for an introductory class in Organizational Leadership. I have omitted her inserted in-text comments for concision and to focus on the end comment, although the marginal comments do provide greater specificity and clarification than the conclusion alone suggests.

Dear K-,

Thank you for your submission to the Online Writing Center.

First, I really enjoyed reading your paper and learning about Transformational Leadership. Your paper was very informative and I definitely learned new things about President Truman through his inaugural speech!

I have attached your paper with a few additional comments boxes to the side. Your paper is well-formatted and easy to follow, so I only had a few comments on the actual structure of the paper. One thing I would recommend would be to provide a more detail about how the portions of President Truman's inaugural speech you selected represent each of the four "I"s - each of your explanations seemed very reasonable examples of the four "I"s but many could have benefited from more detail so that your reader understands the point you are making.

One more thing I would recommend doing is to cite the website or web page that you used to obtain President Truman's speech. You have in-text references to specific paragraphs but have not cited the website that the teacher wanted you to use as your source. It is unclear from the assignment description if your professor expects

you to cite the website in a reference list, but it is usually considered an important step to writing college and graduate-level papers.

Overall, you answered the prompts in your assignment description and kept the content relevant.

[boilerplate conclusion]

After each of Rebecca's online responses, I sent her an electronic reply:

Rebecca,

Like everything else I've seen from you, this is a strong initial response.

First, it is thorough, so I again want to caution you against spending more than an hour on your reply, and even better, try to limit yourself to 30 minutes. I'll also continue to caution tutors against over-exuberance, which is a little sad, since I like enthusiasm in the face to face sessions. Here, though, watch out for eager adverbs and punctuation: "I **really** enjoyed reading your paper and learning about Transformational Leadership. Your paper was **very** informative and I **definitely** learned new things about President Truman through his inaugural speech**!"** [my bold]

I'll also recommend in-text comments in the direction of these two:

<<How is he using that to change the people's point of view? I think your point is a good one, but it may help to elaborate on this point to help your reader understand it more clearly.>>

And

<<Could you explain this more? How is President Truman using the concept of democracy to inspire his listeners? Further explanation may help your readers understand your meaning.>>

The other comments are fine, of course. But these two ask the writer to go deeper and think harder about the paper. In other words, if the writer can begin to think more about what these questions are asking, he will be a better student and a better writer; he won't just have a more-correct paper.

Thanks for all you do, and stay enthusiastic at our meetings despite anything I might say here.

Later, Rebecca suggested that "My first few submissions were all over the place, with long comments in the sidebars that explained why something was incorrect as well as some direct solutions to fix the problem. And I always made sure to tell the student how much I enjoyed their paper, even if it was actually really painful to read and I obviously didn't enjoy it. It was important that students felt good about themselves and their papers though!" She's right. That balance—between criticism and support—is difficult to achieve, both face to face and electronically. Yet interestingly, it may be easier virtually, with no need to hide any pained expression or continually, and perhaps insincerely, reassure.

Rebecca's online tutoring response, a few months later, to an Art History paper analyzing a museum artifact:

Dear J--,

Thank you for your submission to the Online Writing Center.

First, the content of your paper seemed solid, and it appears to meet the assignment requirements for format and organization. After reading your paper I was well-informed on the importance of the hippopotamus to Egyptian culture and how the piece from the St. Louis Art Museum fit into Egyptian artistic depictions of the animal.

I have made a few comments to the side of your paper, which I have attached to this email. Most of the comments focus on continuity of your topic and helping your reader follow the flow of the paper more easily.

For your concern about whether your wording is strange, my biggest suggestion would be for you to read your paper out loud. By reading your paper out loud, you may catch phrases or sentences that are not written the way you would say them. I have highlighted a few instances where I believe this is the case in your paper. While reading your paper out loud, make sure to pay attention to the times that you don't say the words that are on the page - perhaps you said what you meant rather than what is actually written, or perhaps you said it more clearly than the way it is written. When you find a phrase or sentence like that, try to rewrite it to match what you said, or in a way that you think someone would understand your meaning if they could not see your paper and only could listen to you read it to them.

[Boilerplate conclusion]

*And my electronic reply to Rebecca's respons*e:

Rebecca,

I'm beginning to see how having previously responded to papers online may now be speeding up the process—I hope that the body of this response didn't take too much time, since you nicely customized it for this paper. By now I hope

that the basic approach you've developed—thanks, read aloud, custom comment, make a face to face appt—holds up.

The comments in the margins are good as well, in part because they convey some nuts and bolts ideas that students really should know and follow; in 2010, we're still reminding students to spell-check! But I prefer the comments that ask questions—"Can you transition or connect the idea of mummification and Egyptian burial rituals to your topic further?" and to a lesser extent this one—"Is this referring to the hippopotamus?" (lesser because the question seems rhetorical; still I like the phrasing) to this one: "This is a rather abrupt ending to your paper." You are certainly right—the last sentence of a paper almost certainly should not begin with "also"! But is there a way to phrase it so that the person has a question rather than an instruction to consider?

Overall, great job. Continue.

My own response, in retrospect, is not perfect. While Rebecca did ask whether the writer could "transition or connect the idea of mummification and Egyptian burial rituals to your topic further," the writer could still wonder how, or why, a transition would be necessary. It is difficult in an online session for tutors to anticipate or answer such questions in their responses, and in the last year, tutors have attempted to convey their questions to writers as genuine rather than rhetorical, creating a back and forth stream of responses.

Still, at the time, Rebecca handled my comments well. Later, she wrote the following:

> After receiving feedback on my feedback—that I was spending too long on each writing submission and that I really shouldn't be so effervescent with my praise of the writer's paper—I took some time to rethink my strategy for replying to online submissions. My new strategy consisted of pointing out issues in a student's paper by forcing the student to reflect on his or her own writing […], turning the locus of control back to the student. […] The student can learn how to find resources for him or herself. (my ellipses)

By now, Rebecca's philosophy—if not quite her practices—were in keeping with the idea of the writing center, online or not.

Rebecca's online response near the end of the year to a Composition research paper arguing for the legalization of marijuana:

Hi A--,

Thank you for your submission to the Online Writing Center.

First, your paper appears to meet most of the assignment requirements for format and organization. Also, after reading it I was better informed about the history of cannabis use.

I have made a few comments to the side of your paper, which I have attached to this email. Most of the comments focus on clarity and helping your reader understand your meaning.

My biggest suggestion would be for you to read your paper out loud. By reading your paper out loud, you may catch phrases or sentences that are not written the way you would say them. While reading your paper out loud, make sure to pay attention to the times that you don't say the words that are on the page - perhaps you said what you meant rather than what is actually written, or perhaps you said it more clearly than the way it is written. When you find a phrase or sentence like that, try to rewrite it to match what you said, or in a way that you think someone would understand your meaning if they could not see your paper and only could listen to you read it to them.

My other suggestions would be to utilize your professor's comments as much as possible, since the comments are an indication of what he or she is looking for and would like to see revised. Based off of your assignment description, the points that would appear to benefit the most from further work are the following:

- The essay includes a clear thesis that is developed throughout the paper.

(I was unsure of your thesis after reading your paper).

- Include strong verbs as much as possible.

(Many times your sentences have extra verbs, such as your sentence: "Cannabis also aids in relieving the side effects of radiation..." - in this case your sentence uses "aids" and "relieving" together, where if you used one strong verb the sentence may flow better).

- Proofread your work carefully to eliminate careless errors. Use correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Write in complete sentences.

(This can be addressed through using SpellCheck and looking for the squiggly underlining, as well as reading your paper out loud).

[Conclusion]

I want to emphasize again that Rebecca did attach a document with in-text comments to point out specific issues with grammar and punctuation that came up in the writer's essays, including resources that the writer might use to address certain errors.

My electronic reply to Rebecca's response:

> Rebecca,
>
> This is another thorough and helpful response to the student. It also seems to have taken my comments to you last time into account—the end comments consistently refer back to a specific aspect of the student's paper, and the inserted/in-text comments are carefully phrased in order to give the student more to consider. This was even a tricky submission because the paper was, on the one hand, reasonably strong (compared to the examples I keep giving during meetings, anyway) and because there are so many variables: online, of course, but also research, citations, stated student concerns, and detailed instructor requirements. That means a lot of discrete decisions on your part.
>
> I may have to make this paper, and your response, required reading for the other tutors. And yes, I'm using the superlatives that I told tutors not to use.

Conclusion

Reflecting at the end of her first year, Rebecca felt more secure in her tutoring: "This new method is helping students to become better writers rather than creating immediately better papers, since that is the overall mission of the writing center." But it is impossible, and even undesirable, to dispel all doubt. Indeed, it remains difficult to determine whether student writers agree that they have indeed improved. But Rebecca's sentiments have been echoed many times in emails from and surveys of our students. This year, about half of the students who submitted papers electronically replied to their tutor, revised and resubmitted the same paper based on the tutor's comments, or submitted another paper later in the semester. Over the past three years, the number of electronic submissions has increased more than threefold. Finally, learning from Jessica, newer tutors have begun cultivating online correspondences with individual students in much the same way that students choose recurring face-to-face appointments with the same tutor throughout the year, allowing tutors to gauge whether their online students have improved over several months' time.

But peer tutors' own, personal sentiments are crucial, since they themselves are students and learners as well. "In the meantime," as Rebecca concluded, "I know that my responses have grown with me as I have grown personally as a writing tutor, and I hope that giving (and receiving!) feedback is a skill I will continue to develop throughout my entire life." As a peer tutor trainer, I find her development, and reaction, crucial. While I want my tutors to help as many students as possible as well as possible, they themselves are also undergraduates with lessons to learn and lives ahead of them to lead. Rebecca continued to tutor for another year, until she graduated. She is now a graduate student in Occupational Therapy and a skilled communicator and rhetorician. And my new tutors are learning from her groundwork, with each year's Rebeccas learning from the last. Skeptics abound in the literature of online writing centers, but I, for now, am a cautious convert.

Notes

1. Also see Breuch, "Developing Sound Tutor Training for Online Writing Centers: Creating Productive Peer Reviewers."
2. Although I am using the word "template," I was influenced by Atul Gawande's *Checklist Manifesto*; the template also functions as a kind of checklist for tutors against omission or failure.

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